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ABSTRACT

Noting children's limited opportunities for cross-age interaction, this paper discusses the benefits of mixed-aged groupings of preschool and elementary school children for social and intellectual development. The benefits for older children and younger children are considered in turn, and general benefits to both groups and their adult caregivers are also discussed. The paper notes that, in general, the potential benefits of mixed-age groups represent life skills not considered on state achievement tests. These skills include learning at an early age how to offer comfort, to read to and for those who cannot yet do so, learning how to request assistance from more competent peers, and engaging in more complex play and problem solving. (JPB)

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The Benefits of the Mix[1]

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Some years ago I arrived at a child care center just in time to observe a caregiver struggling bravely to get eleven two-year-olds upstairs to the second floor activity room! While her co-caregiver was helping a few others in the bathroom she was challenged by one girl stubbornly fixed to the bottom step pleading to be carried. Another moaned pitifully with thumb in the mouth as he kept dropping the remains of what surely was once a lovely blanket. Another slowly made her way climbing on all fours, as others attempted to hold hands with any willing co-climber.

But imagine how much more manageable this might have been if among the eleven were three or four two-year-olds, a few three-year-olds and the rest fours. The caregiver would be ready to help the youngest, and encourage the oldest ones to give helping hands to the middle ones. The fact is that when two-year-olds are in a group together they are of little value to each other. Even though it's not natural for young children to spend large proportions of time in same-age litters, we seem to insist that they be cared for and educated in them!

Young children these days have limited experience of cross-age interaction for several reasons. First, the size of the family has substantially decreased in the last fifty or more years. Second, the amount of time young children spend in out-of-home child-care settings has increased, and third, increased family mobility deprives children of frequent and

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regular informal contact with cousins of various ages. Together these trends mean that children spend more and more time in age-segregated settings.

The good news, however, is that there is evidence of many potential benefits to both children and adults when children are mixed with others of different ages (See Katz, 1990). The accumulated evidence of mixing ages throughout the *elementary* school years indicates that while there are no strong academic benefits, there are consistent social benefits in the form of important life skills. However, during the *preschool* years, research indicates several advantages to children's social and intellectual development, as well as to the adults who care for them and teach them.

Social benefits to the children

Research indicates that children associate different expectations by age very early. Preschoolers will even modify their behavior when trying to comfort a baby versus a same-age peer. Even a three-year-old assigns different attributes and behavior to a picture of a younger than a picture of an older child. By about the age of four, children themselves feel pressure to match their age-mates in many behaviors and abilities. Needless to say, this pressure gives rise to strong competitive behaviors and early forms of one-upmanship!

Benefits to older children

Many parents mistakenly believe that mixing the ages only benefits the youngest children. However, the benefits go both ways. For example, in mixed-age groups older children more often exhibit leadership than the very same children show when they are among their same-age peers. Indeed, many older children who are not confident leaders in their own age group seem to feel less threatened when attempting to be leaders in

mixed age groups. They also engage in more help-giving, explaining, teaching, and sharing behaviors and show greater sensitivity to the complexities of group processes in the mix. These are useful life skills to develop.

Furthermore in the mix, older ones often facilitate the efforts of others rather than try to out-do or sometimes even thwart them! Here they are providing models of positive social behavior that the next generation will be able to apply when their turn comes.

In some cases older children who have difficulty in regulating their own behavior improve when encouraged to help younger ones observe the rules of the group. Once teachers or caregivers ask such children to remind the younger ones about the rules, they seem to be better able to do so themselves. Of course, the caregivers and teachers may have to stay close by to help resist the temptation felt by such children to become heavy handed sanctimonious law enforcers!

Many children who are socially less mature than their age-mates are less often rebuffed by the younger ones in the mixed-age group. In this way, when the ages are mixed these timid older ones have opportunities to practice and polish social skills with younger ones and thereby learn to use them with the greater confidence required for competent interaction with their own age mates.

Benefits to the younger ones

In mixed-age groups older children are encouraged and expected to help the younger ones. Younger children who are assisted by older ones will do the same in their turn when they are the seniors. Such early nurturing behaviors can and should be encouraged in preschools not only because it is good for children in need of comfort and assistance, but because it provides a model that the young recipients will use themselves. These help-giving and nurturing behaviors are life skills. Indeed, they are early forms of parent

education! All through the growing years children should have genuine opportunities to be nurturant and helpful to those who need it.

In a mixed-age group incidents are inevitable in which younger ones are denied access to activities, materials or equipment for which they are not yet ready--either because they are too small or for other developmental reasons. When adults say to children something like "You'll be able to do that next year when you are bigger, or stronger, or understand X better, etc," children are helped to learn to accept their limitations. Children shouldn't be misled into believing they can do anything they set their minds to--none of us can! Even adults sometimes need adult help in accepting their limitations.

Intellectual Benefits of Age Mixing

Research on the development of communicative competence--a major aspect of development during the preschool years-shows that even three- and four-year olds modify their statements depending on the ages of the persons they are addressing. For example, they modify the length and complexity, voice and tone of the their verbal expression to create a favorable communication environment depending on the age of the recipient. This means that both the older and younger ones in a mixed-age group have ample opportunity to sharpen their communicative skills by taking note of the characteristics of others around them, and by "reading" their feelings and wishes.

Benefits to the Older Children

As soon as the age range of a group is increased, the number of teachers and helpers also increases. Naturally occurring opportunities for older children to explain things to younger

ones, to write things down for them, to read to and for them, all serve to strengthen their own skillfulness. Having to teach or explain something to others causes the teacher to think carefully about his or her understanding of the problem -- life skill of great value. Furthermore, when the older children help younger ones in this way their sense of self-esteem and feelings of competence are strengthened by the clear first-hand evidence that they are being useful in a very real way.

Occasionally it happens that an older child reads or writes or explains something *incorrectly* for a younger one! In this case the adult in charge learns something about the helper and well as the recipient that she might not have known otherwise! She is then in a good position to aid both of them.

Of course, it is always possible that younger ones will pester the older ones for help with various tasks and chores. The adults can teach the older ones how to say to the younger ones something like "I can't help you right now, but as soon as I have finished what I'm doing I'll be along to help." Being able to respond to a request for help in this way is a life-skill--it resembles something parents say daily! The older ones learn graceful ways to respond to demands, and the younger ones learn that their needs sometimes have to be postponed--all of which are life-skills!

Benefits to the Younger Ones

Participation in complex play is more frequent for young children when they are among older children than when they are in groups of same-age peers. This is particularly true with three- and four-year-olds. It has been shown that when three- and four-year-olds are mixed with fives or sixes, they can and do participate in and contribute to much more complex activities than they could ever initiate if they were all by themselves. The older children initiate and set up the

activity, and the younger ones are stimulated to follow along and contribute to it as best they can.

The younger ones in the group are likely also to be continually exposed to more mature problem-solving behavior than would be true in a same-age groups. In this way their own development is stimulated, and they often try out new approaches to problems based on these observations.

General Benefits

Among the many benefits of mixing the ages are those to the adults who are in charge. The wider the age range, the more likely the demands made on the caregivers and teachers will vary. Indeed, research on the problems facing the rapidly increasing numbers of multiple-birth siblings and their parents indicates that virtually all the challenges of child rearing are intensified by having to meet the needs of children very close in developmental status, roughly linked to age (Katz, 1998). Evidence suggests also that when children are in same age groups those who take care of them are more likely to compare them and to pressure them to be alike in behavior and development. So the mix helps to reduce the temptation of caregivers and teachers to treat all their young charges alike and to expect them all to be at the same place on important developmental milestones.

Evidence suggests also that in a mixed-age group caregivers and teachers are much more likely to address individual differences not only *between* children, but also *within* children. Some children, for example are close to their same age peers in physical prowess, but not in verbal expressiveness, or vice versa. The wider age range in the group somehow makes it easier for adults to acknowledge and accept these individual zigzags in patterns of development; they feel less pressure to get them all to the same place at the same time. Parents often need help in understanding how

important it is to allow for differences between and within children in their developmental trajectories.

From the point of view of the children themselves, mixing the ages also helps to postpone the need for very young children to conform to whole-group rules and routines. In this way, the mix provides a group atmosphere that resembles family life more closely than the highly regimented nature of institutions like schools.

There are many good reasons why caregivers, teachers and parents might be hesitant about mixing the ages in early childhood settings. They may fear that older ones will overwhelm younger ones; or that perhaps older ones will not be sufficiently challenged, or will even find the younger ones a nuisance or a burden. There is no evidence to suggest that these and other potential risks are any greater for mixed-age groups than they are for same-age groups. In any group there is a range in maturity, ability and experience. In any group, it is likely that some children will need help in coping effectively with others, regardless of the age range within it.

As already suggested, it is important take naturally occurring opportunities to encourage children to help each and seek help from each other in appropriate ways. Adults can help by encouraging older children to think about ways to involve younger ones in their plans as well as how to graciously divert them from interfering with their plans.

Adults also help children gain perspective on their own growing competence and where they themselves so recently were as they teach them to appreciate the efforts of younger ones. At the same time the teacher can discourage age stereotyping when older ones might be tempted to call the younger ones "babies" or "cry babies" and tease them about the behavior they so recently engaged in themselves.

Conclusion

The benefits of mixing the ages are not automatic! Adults in charge of mixed age groups in early childhood settings have a significant role to play in making them happen.

The potential benefits to children outlined above represent *life skills* that are not on anybody's state achievement tests! For example, learning at an early age how to offer comfort, to read to and for those who cannot yet do so, learning how to request assistance from more competent peers, confronting and accepting gracefully the limitations that come with being very small and young, all occur naturally in a mixed-age group.

The two-year-olds in the incident described at the beginning of this article were observed in a state which specifies staff-child ratio by age group. In this way, state regulations in early childhood settings seem to require early age segregation, depriving both adults and children of the many potential benefits of an age mix outlined above. Discussion with the state and local authorities concerning flexibility on age grouping can often help on this issue. It is certainly worth taking up at state meetings and conferences.

Keep in mind that every way to organize groups presents some risks. But with good teaching, the potential benefits of grouping children modeled on the family rather than the factory are great enough to warrant serious consideration and support.

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